



cordially invite you to the international conference on
Public Opinion and the Media
between Europe and the Middle East

November 15, 2006: Orient-Institut Beirut, Zogaq al Blat

Keynote: Measuring the Opinion, a Theoretical and Practical Challenge
Erik Neveu, Director of the Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Rennes

November 16-17, 2006: École Supérieure des Affaires, Clemenceau, Beirut

Panels: The Concept of Public Opinion. Public Opinion, Religion and the Media.
Politics and Media. Political Economy of the Media.

Conference Report

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
L'Institut Français du Proche-Orient
Orient-Institut Beirut

November 15-17, 2006
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École Supérieure des Affaires, Clemenceau, Beirut

Over the last century, media has been becoming an ever more powerful tool, its link to public opinion strengthening as the breadth of Media grows. Media can be used as a tool of analysis, as it reflects public opinion by viewing the world through the prism of its consumers, providing images and broadcasts that its consumers want to see, hear and read. Media can also be used as a tool of persuasion, as it shapes public opinion, by disseminating the government's, a party's or a stake holder's position.

This relationship, and how it differs between the East and the West, was carefully studied in this year's annual conference: Media and the Public Opinion between Europe and the Middle East. The conference took place from November 15-17, 2006 at the École Supérieure des Affaires in Beirut, Lebanon.

The doors of the conference opened with a keynote speech delivered by Erik Neveu, political science professor at the Institut d'Études Politiques de Rennes. Mr. Neveu's insightful introduction brought the audience's attention to key questions that resonated throughout the conference: How can the social structures of any society share a public opinion? Do all individuals' opinions carry the same weight? How does one measure public opinion?

The consequent days and the five panels provided many opportunities to discuss and contemplate these questions at length.

Thursday morning's opening panel laid the foundation of the conference by discussing the concept of public opinion. The panelists discussed three different means of how the media influences public opinion. Sociologist and professor at École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris, Cyril Lemieux, presented his thesis that media, by highlighting certain themes in their diffusions or by simple choice of focus, have the ability to sway public opinion. By focusing on insecurity, for example, the French media may have inadvertently helped Jean Marie e Pen advance in the 2002 presidential elections. Anthropologist at CNRS-IFPO Damascus, Baudouin Dupret, offered the argument from a different perspective. He showed that large media houses, like al-Jazeera, al-Manar, al-Arabiyya and BBC world, place different emphasis on the themes they cover. This is achieved through broadcast placement and story length. The media houses thus influence their respective public differently. Offering yet another dimension, Larbi Chouikha, sociologist and professor at the Institut de Presse de Tunis at the Université de la Manouba in Tunisia, showed that the internet creates a space that is in some ways free from governmental control, at least for a certain amount of time.

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Thus, the internet creates a platform for voices that are often not found in the tangible public space.

Through these means, the media shapes the public opinion and challenges it to be active in its own creation, as it is the case with the emergence of the internet. Yet, different media channels address different publics and reflect different agendas. Proof is given through the varied emphasis on themes covered by the large media houses.

The second panel discussed public opinion, religion and the media. The panelists Jorgen Nielsen, director of the Danish Institut in Damascus, and Dima Dabbous-Sensenig, director of the Institut for Woman Studies at the Lebanese American University of Beirut, discussed from the vantage points of the Caricature Affair and the al-Jazeera religious talk show Al-Sharī'a wa-l-Ḥayāt, respectively that though media is often seen as voicing the public opinion, this does not need to be true. In cases cited by both panelists, the media sources portrayed extreme viewpoints that were not shared by the public at large, and thus could serve as a means of instrumentalizing the public opinion.

In the third panel, Husam Tammam, political scientist at CEDEJ, Cairo and Yassin Musharbash, media specialist at Spiegel Online, Berlin, discussed Islamist media. The discussion centered around the use of the internet for furthering „extremist“ causes like that of al-Qaeda and the Muslim brotherhood. Such extremist groups use the media to bypass restrictions that the groups face in their respective states. Furthermore, followers and supporters of these groups use the internet every day. Consequently, mainstream media has increased its reporting on the extremists' traffic online, which allows extremist groups to access and influence different publics.

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On the fourth panel, Olfa Lamoum, political scientist at Institut Panos in Paris, Katharina Nötzold from the Center of International Peace Operations in Berlin and Hussein Shaaban, the president of the Iraqi Network for Human Rights

Culture and Development in Baghdad/Beirut, discussed the question of whether a pan-Arab public opinion exists. An argument was brought forth that since al-Jazeera is the channel to which most viewers of Arabic programs turn in the times of crisis, it has succeeded in catering to a pan-Arab audience's choice of headlines and stories. It thereby creates a new means of political demonstration and identity creation in Arabic space. The case was also made that Lebanese television stations could represent a picture of pan-Arab public opinion. However, throughout the panel, there seemed to be an overwhelming doubt that one could refer to a coherent pan-Arab public opinion.

Gelöscht: al-Jazeera

Naomi Sakr, senior scholar at the School of Media Arts and Design, University of Westminster, London, Tristan Mattelart, Institut Français de Presse, Université Paris II and Çiçek Bacik, research fellow at the Free University of Berlin, discussed the political economy of the media in the fifth and last panel of the conference. The discussion topics ranged from public opinion polls and stakeholders to the influence of transnational media on the building of the national public space to the parallel world of television for immigrants.

The conference organizers agreed to strive to hold annual conferences related to the joint project "Media and Contemporary History" under the name "Beirut Media Forum" and jointly publish selected proceedings of the conferences. The conference was extensively covered by the Arab, English and French press in Beirut as well as by Lebanese television.

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